

Let Them Eat GMOs

Capitalism's Counter-revolution

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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MIAMI—The vicious and unprovoked police assault on demonstrators during the recent Miami Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) talks produced waves of indignation and anger among both participants and observers. Witnessing Kevlar-armored, weapon-laden RoboCops kick the crap out of teenagers (and some middle-aged people, as well), it's easy to focus solely on these despicable acts of brutality rather than what generated them.

At points, the November 18–21 Miami events often approached the comedic and the absurd: cops paid overtime to collect fallen coconuts so they couldn't be used as missiles against them, or union retirees marching in front of armored personnel carriers holding contingents of battle-ready police with automatic weapons trained on the elderly demonstrators. But mostly the scene was ominous, as well as portentous of the future as a militarized police force imposed a literal state of siege that closed down an entire city based on an overblown fear of invading hordes of anarchists (oh, if we had only been so many, so strong, and so threatening).

One friend, a veteran of violent demonstrations in her native Trinidad, coolly observed as the cops began attacking the crowd not far from us, "Hmm, all dressed up and nowhere to go." This follows Napoleon's famous dictum: the only thing that cannot be done with bayonets "is to sit on them." In other words, the cops were so prepared for battle that they weren't about to let a little thing like the fact that the demonstrators committed no transgression stop them from using their toys.

However, while not ignoring the culpability of individual cops, from the command level to the foot soldier, who either willingly or reluctantly attacked unarmed people, ultimate responsibility belongs at the highest level of society.

The cops obviously love these actions. Their prominence increases. Their budgets swell. The populace views them as the thin line between law and order and what they call anarchy. But none of the police arrived ready for war in the streets of Miami on their own volition. They were ordered there by gentlemen of power wearing \$2,500 suits and \$8,000 Rolex watches, who speak rationally about the benefits of free trade, alleviating poverty, expressing concern for the environment and advocating a capitalism without borders.

However, we know these men are in an argument against reality since we have a history through which to view their intent. Under the terms, for instance, of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), tariffs preventing the import of American corn into Mexico were dropped. This allowed US agribusinesses to flood Mexican markets with low-priced produce which drove millions of farmers, unable to compete in the "free market," out of business.

In a stroke, this eliminated a culture and way of life hundreds of years old, allowing Monsanto's genetically modified (GMO) corn into traditional diets, and forcing hundreds of thousands of people to leave their failed farms for the squalor of Mexico City or the border town maquiladoras sweatshops. This transformation from life in a tradition-bound, subsistence culture to being the wretched of the earth is completed once shattered families arrive in that nation's capital where many of the city's 25 million residents live in shanties atop garbage dumps. Farmers who manage to survive the onslaught of this top-down class warfare have begun to use herbicides and pesticides for the first time in an attempt to raise their crop yield, being forced to turn to Monsanto for their chemicals.

However, the borderless world of capital obviously doesn't apply to people along the US/Mexico divide. Also, hundreds of Latin American activists did not experience open borders when they were denied entry to the US to prevent them from protesting at the Miami trade talks.

The state always exhibits its most violent and repressive nature at critical junctures in capitalist development. Historians often note the level of government suppression of dissent prior to and during World War I as being much higher than currently, but the intensity of state violence isn't the issue so much as its function.

The armed might of the state has acted as the ultimate guarantor of the racket of concentrated wealth and power since it arose 4,000 years ago. This includes repressing not only daily acts of resistance and revolt, but also stopping mass challenges to power, as well. Most enduring states, when their legitimacy is confronted, can exhibit a superficial flexibility that allows for a bending of previous definitions of power. However, at crucial points such as the First World War, the American elite wasn't going to allow anarchists, socialists, unionists and others who opposed entry into the European conflict to derail their plans to set out upon the road of empire abroad. The same is true now.

A union organizer I spoke to in Miami told me she thought the message of opposition to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was lost in the tear gas, rubber bullets, and concussion grenades. But the state's message is violence. Opposition to its policies is futile is exactly what was intended to be communicated.

The fact that the trade meetings held in downtown Miami's ultra-swank Inter-Continental Hotel resulted in much less than was hoped for by the major players (many observers say it was a failure) doesn't alter what we are facing: capitalism's counterrevolution. We stand at the end of one era of capital's march across the planet, poised to enter another phase in which globalization is the economic mode, with authoritarian rule as its political form. Although mixed with the seemingly contradictory aspect of increased formal democracy and the superficial recognition of previously excluded groups, society's crucial decisions will be made without the clumsy intervention of the common people. Or, so the rulers intend.

This long process commenced with the so-called democratic revolutions which began in the 17th century in England, swept through its colony on this continent and France in the 18th, and continued in other countries up until the present. Today, George Bush obscenely calls for more democracies like ours (elections stolen and functioning essentially like auctions) in the Middle East.

These epoch changing events proceeded under the radical assumption that the ruled should be allowed to participate in decision making, challenging thousands of years of absolutist governance by kings, czars, pharaohs, emperors, sultans, etc.

Most of the early challenges to imperial domination came from an emerging class of merchants and industrialists who were constrained from exercising their economic potential by the ancient form of royal rule. Though these revolutionaries sung the praises of the common man, they really had nothing more in mind than the rule of WORMs (white, old, rich, men). The domination by money and men essentially continues everywhere today.

Many of the theoreticians and foot soldiers of the capitalist insurgency, however, took seriously the call of "fraternity, liberty, and equality" emblazoned on the banners of 18th century revolutions as being universal. Much of the political and military turmoil of the last 300 years has been about extending that vision, essentially completing the social component of the capitalist victories over feudalism.

In this country, reform movements to abolish slavery, extend the vote beyond white, propertied males, and unionization, for instance, were about that extension. Although the ruling elite initially opposed most reforms, the system was flexible enough to realize that capitulating to these demands actually extended and affirmed its rule without relinquishing ultimate power or control.

Now, with capitalism being pushed by necessity toward total global integration through trade pacts and alliances, even this process of reform is being reversed. Capitalism must always expand or wither. The insanity of its internal motor demands this and no living standard or forest is going to get in the way of its survival, hence, the ferocious response to opposition we witnessed in Miami.

The rulers realize that if they allow authentic democracy, the people most dramatically affected would obviously say no to the provisions of FTAA, as well as previous disastrous accords such as the WTO and NAFTA. Everyone involved knows that the core of these treaties do nothing other than maintain the inequality of class society. Hence, the battle in Miami was to preserve elite rather than popular control of the future.

Capitalism's current direction is, hence, back the other way towards absolute rule, but this time not by a single ruler rationalized by religious mystification. Instead, our fates are in the hands of a class of politicians and administrators who will act out the brutal logic of a system which can allow no concern for people or the planet. Today's mystification involves a fear of terrorism and a mesmerized trust in a mediatized version of reality.

In many ways, this changes nothing for people who advocate the elimination of the state and capitalism as a precondition for revolutionary change, but we should realize that the rulers are upping the ante and respond accordingly.

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